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THE HISTORY
OF PRINTING
IN THE
UNITED STATES

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By Douglas C. McMurtrie



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THE HISTORY OF PRINTING IN THE UNITED STATES

THE history of printing in the United States is a subject deserving of more attention from master printers and organizations of master printers throughout the country. The reason for this is that so many of the facts regarding this important aspect of

cultural history are still to be brought to light, and it is meet and proper that the printers of today should be instrumental in this connection.

It is a matter which cannot but occasion surprise that the last history of printing in America was published one hundred and nineteen years ago. The author of that history was a printer — and a distinguished one indeed — Isaiah Thomas of Worcester, Mass., the publisher of the *Massachusetts Spy* and the founder of the American Antiquarian Society. In the intervening period no other author has attempted a similar work.

If one sought today comprehensive information on this subject, he would encounter much difficulty in finding it. The most inclusive statement covering all the states of the Union will be found in John Clyde Oswald's excellent *History of Printing*, in which one short

paragraph is devoted to the beginnings of printing in each state. For the last three years there has been running in the *American Printer* an excellent series of articles by L. Nelson Nichols of the New York Public Library, dealing with early printing in various states. Both of these authorities are accurate in their statements of the present state of knowledge regarding the subject.

The present state of knowledge, however, in many cases, does not suffice, for frequently it is incorrect. The only way to establish the facts or reliably confirm statements already made is by intensive study in the field, examining the contents of the principal historical libraries in an individual state, searching manuscript records, and endeavoring in every way to base statements on first-hand contemporary evidence.

Such work I have been endeavoring in a modest way to do, and some of the

results have been surprising. In cooperation with Mr. William Pfaff of New Orleans, for example, there was undertaken a study of early printing in Louisiana, where the earliest known product of the press was dated 1768. During the course of the inquiry there was discovered a broadside of great historical importance dated in 1764, thus setting forward the date of the first printing in Louisiana by four years. Incidentally there was uncovered much information of vital interest regarding Denis Braud, the first printer, and his typographic service.

In 1909 was celebrated in Detroit the centenary of the first printing in Michigan, which, according to a score of historians, had taken place in 1809 under the auspices of Father Gabriel Richard. Yet when an intensive study of Michigan printing history was undertaken in cooperation with Printers

Incorporated of Detroit, there was found specific evidence that the first printing in that state was done thirteen years earlier. This necessitates revision of an important feature in any future histories of Michigan.

In Wisconsin the commonly accepted facts were confirmed, but a large number of issues of the early press not heretofore known were recorded, and much information was developed regarding the early printers and their work. The results of this study are being printed and published by Frank McCaffrey of Seattle, in cooperation with whom a similar study of early printing in the state of Washington is now under way. An inquiry relative to the beginnings of printing in Oregon is soon to be undertaken in cooperation with the Bushong Company in the city of Portland.

To consider for a moment a differ-

ent section of the country, we find in New Mexico that the usual statements regarding the introduction of the printing press were approximately correct, so far as date was concerned. It was related that the first newspaper, *El Crepusculo*, was published at Taos, by a Catholic priest, Antonio Jose Martinez, to further his campaign for election to the Mexican congress. Upon the successful termination of that campaign, the paper was discontinued.

Investigation revealed that the worthy Martinez was never elected to congress, but that a man named Barreiro at Santa Fe had been, and that prior to the latter's departure for Mexico City, he had presented to the Deputacion a file of the paper lately published by him in that city. From a letter in the collection of the Historical Society of New Mexico we find the full title of this paper, *El Crepusculo de la Libertad*, the owner of

the printing office, Ramon Abreu, the name of the journeyman printer, Jesus Maria Baca, and the year of issue, 1834. In this instance, the story was in some respects correct, but it related to the wrong man.

To consider for a moment the states whose early printing has been adequately studied, we think first of Maryland, a masterly monograph on this subject by Lawrence C. Wroth having been published several years ago by the Typothetae of Baltimore, and printed by Norman T. A. Munder. Next in order of adequacy of coverage come Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and North Carolina. For some other states there are good newspaper histories, but these do not embrace the work of the book and job press.

In the western field, California is an exception. The output of its early

press and the work of its pioneer printers has been dealt with fully and competently by Robert Cowan, Henry Wagner, and others. Early printing in Texas is now being studied by Thomas W. Streeter and E. W. Winkler, so this subject is in most able hands.

The work of the pioneer printers in almost every other state would profit by intensive study, and I believe any master printer who would interest himself in the subject would find the effort would repay rich rewards — not financially — but in satisfaction and interest. By so doing, he would, furthermore, make a permanent contribution to the history of this city or state.

Should any master printer feel disposed to interest himself in such a piece of work, I can only add that I stand ready to assist the effort by any means within my power.

